

Flaming Righteousness, a Short Story

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It was like any other adult bookstore -- there was nothing very "controversial" in its whitewashed windows, black lettered signs. Hardly sensational enough to deserve what happened there last Friday. But to some people I guess it was.

The store is on the corner of 32nd and Main surrounded by flashing neon and fourth-rate bars. I was an infrequent visitor there, not that I really go in for those kinds of things, but it breaks the tedium of a long work-day now and then.

Anyway, I was down there last Friday around 10:00. There was the usual crowd -- pimply faced adolescents, sailors on the town, and assorted "types" that I myself don't associate with. The proprietor was settled on his usual perch -- the stool behind the cash register, resting his massive stomach against the glass display case, incessantly chomping his greasy cigar, keeping an ever vigilant eye on his customers. He always reminded me of the typical embodiment of the kind of values he sold, leading a true flesh-pot existence.

That evening I wasn't really interested in thumbing the lewd magazines or wasting my quarters on cheap pornographic films -- instead, in a rather melancholic mood, I satisfied myself by gazing out the shop's front door, leaning on the magazine rack, and watching the slick asphalt in the rain. I was dreamily lost in the swirling traffic lights, sounds, and the smell of rain when it all started.

Disinterestedly I watched as a white van, gleaming in the night rain, eased up to the curb and stopped -- its engine idling.

Now I want you to understand that there's nothing exceptional about our city, that's the odd part of the whole affair. Like any other large metropolis, we have had our uproars about pornography, sexual liberation, and obscenity, but when the storm had blown over things rolled right along. Oh well, yes, the police did raid a few movie houses and a few topless bars, but what with our "wonderful" judicial system now-a-days, things kept right on rolling -- even got so they didn't bat an eye at live sex shows. Well, from the bookstore I'd seen my share of ladies from the Salvation Army and long-haired Jesus freaks with their Bibles -- but they were only amusing to the local prostitutes and pimps, hardly effective.

This was another story. The long side door of the van glided backwards on its sliding hinges, and in my dreamy state of mind, I was jolted into reality. I did a quick double take. Three people stepped from the van to the sidewalk -- their bodies gleaming in milk-white vinyl suits -- their faces were cloaked in vinyl

masks with blue goggles. Each of them carried something different. As they advanced toward the shop, I began to make out what each one carried -- then I was really shocked. The first figure, obviously a woman, held a book and judging from its appearance I guessed it was a Bible. She was followed by a taller figure, a man.

It was hard to tell what he was holding, but when I did see, I backed out of the doorway very rapidly. I've seen a M-16 rifle before, but never a milk-white one. Anyway, I didn't intend to study one at point-blank range. The last figure looked like a scuba-driver with a vacuum cleaner. He had two large metal tanks strapped to his back with a hose feeding out of the top. The hose was connected to a long nozzle that he held in his hands across his chest.

The three figures moved to the center of the store the woman flanked on both sides by the men. The front exit of the store was blocked by the man with the gun. The woman pulled off her goggles and yanked backward on the zipper running up the middle of the face mask. The hood fell away like a lacquered eggshell revealing her face, and a strikingly beautiful one it was. Her midnight hair against the vinyl was quite a shocking sight and her dark eyes burned with such spiritual fire that even Joan of Arc might have shivered with envy. Her naturally red lips that were probably very lovely were now a firm scarlet line of contempt and resolve. She was a beautiful woman, but obviously one not preoccupied with her own beauty. She had other things on her mind. Dramatically she surveyed each person in the room, nailing them with her flaming eyes. She gave me a withering glance and finally raised her Bible, parting it at the marker.

"The wages of sin is death!" Her vibrant voice cut the air like Deborah of old, and without the batting of an eye, she proceeded with a fifteen-minute sermon. It included the Genesis account of Noah's sinful era, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and eventually moved into the New Testament. With renewed vigor, she intoned the 24th Chapter of Matthew. Halfway through, a rather "dubious" man with a purse on his shoulder lisped something about how he "really must be on his way". He was promptly discouraged when he found the M-16's milk-white muzzle in his rib cage. He decided to stay for the rest of the "Bible lesson." The fat proprietor, who all this while had obviously been contemplating some drastic action, at the sight of the gun turned pale and contented himself by fiercely scratching his belly and rolling his eyes.

"Yea, the chaff shall be cast into the everlasting fire that shall not go out!" "I came to cast fire upon the earth, would that it were already kindled!" Closing the Bible, she ended her sermon on that disturbing note. Immediately, the man with the vacuum cleaner ordered everybody to the front door. A match briefly flared in the man's white gloved hand; it flickered as he held it in front of the nozzle's spout -- Whoosh! A gas flame suddenly erupted. That was no average vacuum, but a WW II flame thrower-flame and all!

While the proprietor and customers trembled at gun point, the man with the flame thrower walked to the back of the shop. The shop owner trembled visibly as the flame thrower's first outburst of fiery tongues belched from the nozzle, the glass display case of perverse plastic "novelties" melted in one wheezing sigh and continued to burn. Whoosh! The curtains around the pornographic film stalls turned to fiery ash, the films to liquid, flaming celluloid.

With firm resolve the man with the torch moved to the long racks of magazines and novels, their lurid covers smiling the sweet smile of pleasure toward him. He wasn't too responsive -- Whoosh! I watched with a sort of hideous fascination as the nude figures on the covers twisted and turned in the flames. It looked like a scene right out of Dante's Inferno.

The proprietor stood wringing his fat hands, sweat and tears of fear and frustration pouring down his jowls. The heat was devastating. The man with the flame thrower turned to the one with the gun and nodded his head. The modern-day Deborah zipped up her hood and replaced her goggles, with that we were all herded onto the front sidewalk. By now a large crowd was beginning to gather, but miraculously no police or firemen.

The figures in white didn't appear discomforted or worried by the crowd. They quietly began to climb into the van. The last one to come out of the store was the flame thrower. As he moved across the concrete, like a scene from some moon flight, a young sailor still clutching a "girlie" magazine muttered an oath. It was a little thing, not big in most people's eyes, but big enough. The flame thrower man stopped, then pivoted on his toes; he took a long look, then walked quickly in the sailor's direction.

Instinctively, at the sight of the still flaming nozzle, the sailor cringed. A white hand moved as a blur in the pale street light -- the "girlie" magazine had changed hands.

The wielder of the "mobile torch" walked to the doorway of the flaming shop, standing in the flickering light in his vinyl suit he looked like some angelic being of apocalyptic doom. With a flick of the wrist, he cast the magazine into the fire and calmly walked toward the van.

As the flames began to curl around the picture of the nude, smiling woman on the cover, the van, engine racing, shot from the curb, its tires filling the night with a horrible screaming sound and the nude image turned to flaming ash.

I haven't been back to see what's left of the bookstore. I don't intend to either. You see, I figure only a fool plays with fire twice and still hopes not to be burned.